

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, MARR, MT, UK

SUBJ: BRITISH DEFENSE REVIEW: MALTESE SIGH OF RELIEF

REF: LONDON 6258, 6260

1. PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF MADE A STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT ON DECEMBER 3 CONCERNING BRITISH DEFENSE REVIEW AND READ A LETTER HE HAD RECEIVED FROM BRITISH DEFENSE SECRETARY ROY MASON ON THE SUBJECT. MINTOFF POINTED OUT THAT, DESPITE PRESS SPECULATION TO THE CONTRARY IN THE UK AND MALTA, PLANNED BRITISH MILITARY REDUCTIONS WOULD NOT AFFECT MALTA AT THIS TIME.

2. IN HIS LETTER, MASON ASSURED MINTOFF THAT UK WOULD NOT SEEK ANY CHANGES IN ITS MILITARY FACILITIES AGREEMENT WITH MALTA, AND THAT PREVIOUSLY PLANNED REDUCTIONS OF BRITISH MILITARY FORCES IN MALTA WOULD TAKE PLACE GRADUALLY BETWEEN APRIL 1, 1977 AND MARCH 31, 1979 (WHEN AGREEMENT EXPIRES) MASON ADDED HE DID NOT ANTICIPATE ANY SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN FORCE LEVELS IN MALTA PRIOR TO APRIL 1, 1977.

3. GOM AND OPPOSITION COMMENTS IN PARLIAMENT, AND MALTESE
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PUBLIC AND PRESS REACTION IN GENERAL, HAVE BEEN A COLLECTIVE

SIGH OF RELIEF THAT MALTA'S DELICATELY BALANCED ECONOMY WILL NOT BE JOLTED BY ANY SHORT-RUN CHANGE IN BRITISH DEFENSE SPENDING HERE. OVERALL MALTESE REACTION IS ONE OF APPRECIATION THAT BRITISH HAVE LIVED UP TO COMMITMENTS TO MALTA DESPITE SEVERE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF THEIR OWN.

4. COMMENT: NATIONALIST OPPOSITION HAS REFRAINED FROM OVERLY EMPHASIZING OBVIOUS POINT THAT AFTER YEARS OF CRITICIZING DEFENSE ARRANGEMENTS WITH BRITISH, MALTA'S LABOR GOVERNMENT COULD HAVE BEEN IN REAL TROUBLE IF UK DECISION HAD GONE THE OTHER WAY. INFLATION, UNEMPLOYMENT, AND EFFECTS OF INTERNATIONAL RECESSIONARY TRENDS ARE MAKING SIGNIFICANT INROADS ON MALTA'S ECONOMIC STABILITY. A DRAWDOWN OF BRITISH FORCES IN MALTA AT THIS TIME MIGHT WELL HAVE TIPPED THE BALANCE AND CAUSED BOTH POLITICAL AND SERIOUS ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES FOR MINTOFF. SMITH

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